

# Black liberation theology as a framework for examining the apocalyptic teachings

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## Jesus, the Kingdom of God, and Black Theology: Black Liberation Theology as a Framework for Examining the Apocalyptic Teachings of Jesus of Nazareth

There is very little contention in academia over the conclusion that the teachings of the historical Jesus of Nazareth are expressly concerned with and linked to the Kingdom of God. These parables and teachings (many of which involve Jesus's interaction with various members of Judean and Galilean society) serve as metaphorical speeches and, when analyzed, reveal a new way of viewing the Kingdom of God, a phrase which would have been a common one among Jews of the Ancient Mediterranean World. The phrase "the Kingdom of God" has everything to do with "the renewal of Israel" by way of the establishment of God's will and presence amongst his people (Horsley 77). Viewing the historical Jesus in this light reveals the undercurrent of apocalyptic language in his speeches, a notion which should be examined in the context of ancient Judean and Galilean society.

As these speeches are placed in historical context and scrutinized, a strong similarity between the teachings of Jesus and their apocalyptic undertones and the language of Black theologians can be seen. Indeed, the language of Black theologians, characterized by the term "Black Liberation Theology", points toward the apocalyptic speeches of Jesus as the foundation of their teaching. Black Liberation Theology calls "for a mirroring of Jesus' activity on behalf of the despised", taking into account various words and deeds of Jesus of Nazareth, including open table fellowship, his exorcisms and the apocalyptic nature of his parables and teachings on and about the Kingdom of God (Pinn 219). Considering all this insight divulges the unequivocal impact of Jesus's teachings about the Kingdom of God upon Black Liberation

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Theology: variably, the existence of this influence allows the appellation of Black Liberation Theology as an apocalyptic one, indoctrinated in conflict theory and spawned from oppression...directly hearkening to the apocalyptic teachings of Jesus of Nazareth.

Though it may seem like an exaggeration to employ a survey of Black Theology as a schema for examining the teachings of Jesus, by relating Jesus's apocalyptic teachings to a modern theory which has at its core an overwhelming response to societal and cultural conflict, comparative analysis is established. In conversation with Horsley, I intend to ground the historical Jesus's words in the context of his environment, the ancient Mediterranean world, and to then use this to characterize Black Liberation Theology as one that extracts much of its worldview from similar circumstances as those which the historical Jesus responded to in his own time period.

### Apocalypticism and the Kingdom of God

It is necessary to note that the term " apocalyptic" is a somewhat contentious one that has been problematized by modern Christian theology. Richard A. Horsley, in *Jesus and Empire: The Kingdom of God and the New World Disorder* , gives a well nuanced explanation of how the term has shifted over the years from the understanding of it most common in ancient Hebrew texts. Horsley explains that modern interpreters of the historical Jesus, typically focused on his figure through the lens of theology, ignore and down grade the presence of apocalyptic undercurrents in much of the speeches of Jesus (80). In addition to this modern fallacy, scholarship has

characterized “ apocalyptic” as that which is concerned with “ the end of the world or a “ cosmic catastrophe” (81). Instead of focusing on this understanding of the term, we must consider the nature of traditional Israelite language which can be characterized as “ apocalyptic”; this language is “ metaphoric”, steeped in “ hyperbole” and it typically “... features a fundamental pattern in which the liberation or restoration of the people entails God’s defeat or judgment of Israel’s foreign or domestic rulers” (81). This explanation places into focus the contextualized notion of “ apocalyptic” and connects the understanding with the statement found a few pages prior when Horsley notes that “ The Kingdom of God that brings renewal for the people...utterly excludes the people’s rulers and places them under God’s judgment” (79). Here, the “ judgment” found in apocalyptic language is correlated to the same “ judgment” which can be found in statements about the Kingdom of God. Jesus’ words about the Kingdom of God, thus, contain a level of the apocalyptic nature within them which can be found in many other prophetic speeches of prominent figures in the Hebrew tradition.

The inherent language of the phrase “ the Kingdom of God” places this “ kingdom” in direct opposition to that of Rome, the dominant political system at the time. In labeling the presence of a “ Kingdom of God”, Jesus made the clear distinction between this kingdom and that ruled by Caesar. In utilizing language commonly associated with Roman rule, Jesus’ Kingdom of God message supplants the significance and precedence of Roman rule over that of the rule of God over Israel “ since God is their actual king and master” (99). Marcus J. Borg gives a thorough explanation of the cultural significance

of Jesus' declaration of the " Kingdom of God" in the midst of the eminence of Roman rule. He takes note of the political context in which the word " Kingdom" was often used in the ancient Mediterranean world and how anyone at the time who listened to Jesus would have known that his statement was as much a political one as it was a theological one. Borg concludes that " the usage [of the " Kingdom of God] had to be deliberate [on the part of Jesus], intended to contrast the kingdom of God with the kingdoms of this world (252). Specifically, the kingdom of this world which Jesus would have been striking contrast with was that of the Roman Empire. The term is later ascribed eschatological significance, which will be helpful to the development of the issue discussed in this paper. Here, the term is described further as one that is " not about the end of the space-time world, not about the disappearance or vanishing of the earth, but about the transformation of this world" (252). This further distinction grounds such apocalyptic language in the present while also subverting notions of " apocalyptic" as that which points to the end; rather, apocalyptic language, in this context, involves the metamorphosis of the present world order.

#### Ancient Mediterranean Society and The Kingdom of God

Horsley gives a thorough account of the nature of life in the ancient Mediterranean world and the causes of conflict presented by oppressive Roman rule (85). The areas of Galilee and Judea, where Jesus did most of his teaching, were ruled by ruthless client kings vying for the affections of the Roman emperor. A series of economic and cultural conflicts arose, oftentimes placing the Israelite community in the crosshairs of immense disadvantage. The collection of unfairly high amounts of taxes and the

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gradual loss of family-owned land to corrupt emissaries of Herod Antipas became the cause of much poverty among the peasant class, perhaps the largest class in the ancient Mediterranean world. In the midst of these negative institutionalized shifts under Roman imperialism, many members of the priesthood turned their loyalty to Caesar. Immense economic disparity was often reinforced by elite members of Jewish society.

It is the characterization of the “ Kingdom of God” which makes a clear distinction between the evil policies of Rome and the policies which God’s presence among the people would establish. What illustrates these acutely are the parables of Jesus. For instance, the parable of the prodigal son, found in Luke 15: 11-31, recasts God’s Kingdom as that which is ruled by a compassionate God, moved by the plight of the needy, ready to restore the displaced individual to society. In this Kingdom the “ sinner” is restored and blessed at the same level of the faithful individual. Here, metaphorical language is used to represent the son’s hedonistic venture into a society where he must, eventually, “ feed...pigs” in order to earn enough wages to survive on after squandering the money he did not, by Israelite tradition, inherit because of his status as the second son (15: 15). Here, the mention of the son’s “ feeding of pigs” can be interpreted as his metaphorical removal from God as he is forced to abandon his faith. The son, therefore, is restored to his father upon returning home, saved from the ways of those outside of God’s Kingdom. This parable, then, is an illustration of how the Kingdom of God is characterized as a place of restoration for the people. By characterizing a God who brings renewal to those members of the very bottom rungs of society, Jesus establishes a characterization which runs in

opposition to prevalent power structures in his society. These structures are intrinsically connected to Roman rule.

The exorcisms performed by Jesus also supply a characterization of the Kingdom of God and help to establish what Horsley calls “ the double action of God” (82). This double action refers to God’s simultaneous renewal and restoration of Israel as well as God’s judgment of the oppressive forces which rule Israel. In these remembered instances, Jesus makes a clear distinction between the oppressed and the oppressor. For instance, in Matthew 9: 28-32, the historical Jesus is remembered as having casted out demons from two men. The demons, at the word of Jesus, “ came out of the men and entered the pigs” nearby “ and the whole herd plunged down the steep hillside into the lake and drowned in the water” (v. 32). Horsley gives an account of the metaphorical reading of this instance as well as another in Mark 2, concluding that the representation of the Kingdom of God here reveals that it “ is involved in a struggle for domination of human life, of history, with the opposing demonic forces of Satan” (101). Here, the exorcisms can be read metaphorically, especially in the use of “ pigs” in the first of the two exorcisms. The evil forces, here, are representative of oppressive Roman rule, a notion which falls in line with traditional apocalyptic language in ancient Jewish culture. The restoration of the once possessed individuals to society can be interpreted as the very restoration of Israel after the expulsion of imperialistic forces.

### Black Liberation Theology and Jesus’ Apocalyptic Teachings

Traces of apocalyptic undertones in Jesus' teachings can be used in a discussion of Black Liberation Theology. Many of the themes which permeate the apocalyptic words of Jesus about the eminent arrival of the Kingdom of God run parallel to themes which are found throughout this theology. What seems to be the cause of this connection is the evident presence of conflict within the structure of ancient Mediterranean society and that of modern America, culminating in the Civil Rights movement of the late 1950s and throughout the 1960s. According to Theo Witvliet, author of the book *The Way of the Black Messiah*, Black Liberation Theology occurred as a response to the difficulty of coming to terms with varying views of "Christian reconciliation" and the experiences of members of the black community (xv). Anthony B. Pinn, in his essay "Jesus and Justice: An Outline of Liberation Theology within Black Churches", notes that this theology occurred as "an effort to recover the liberative nature of the Christian gospel - the revolutionary actions of Christ - that had been covered by Christian complacency" (223). What must be noted here is the insufficient nature of a study which looks towards "Christianity" as the source of a modern theology. I think that Pinn's words on the revolutionary nature of the Christ can be reinterpreted, for the purpose of this essay, as the revolutionary actions of the historical Jesus of Nazareth. That the historical Jesus was a revolutionary is not a contentious issue, for he was amongst a host of historical figures who were considered "revolutionaries" in the modern sense of freedom fighters. The language, here, is more significant in terms of relating the teachings of the historical Jesus to inherent teachings within Black Liberation Theology.



Black Liberation Theology is characterized by language very similar to that of the historical Jesus; it is also characterized, just as similarly, by the inherent conflict which it responds to. On a basic level, this theology is the result of a series of responses made by members of the African-American community to the “ wall of racism...an apostate religion, and political expediency, [which] was raised to shut out the light of hope and to place impenetrable ceilings on the aspirations and expectations of...millions” (Edwards 519). Economic disadvantage, political oppression, institutionalized racism and the ever-present remembrance of slavery served as a constant reminder of the devalued position of black people in American society. The circumstances of oppressed African Americans mirror, in many ways, the circumstances faced by Israelites under the oppressive Roman state during the first century. Though this is an obvious connection, it is essential to think of such similarities as a foundational aspect of the appropriation of Jesus’ apocalyptic teachings in a configuration of a new theology purposed as a response to the oppressive culture it conflicts with.

The apocalyptic nature of Jesus’ opposition to Rome in the form of parables, speeches and actions are similar to the general language of Black Liberation Theology. An example of this can be seen in the “ present eschatology” of Dr. Martin Luther King who is quoted by Witvliet:

Now is the time to make real the promises of democracy. Now is  
the time to rise form the dark and desolate valley of segregation  
to the sunlit path of racial justice. Now is the time to lift our nation

from the quicksands of racial injustice to the solid rock of brotherhood.

Now is the time to make justice a reality for all God's children. (122)

Witvliet goes on to state that these words reveal the nature of the "messianic time" in which "the kairos has dawned"; this means "justice for the poor, liberation for the captives, healing for those with broken hearts", notions which Dr. King believed were central to "Jesus' manifesto" (122-123). Here lies a direct correlation between the teachings of Jesus and those central to Black Liberation Theology, a theology which seeks out the manifestation of justice for the oppressed in the modern world. This language is characteristically apocalyptic in that it adheres to the nuanced understanding elaborated on in Horsley's book. Restoration is at the center of this theology as well as judgment, implied in the idea of making "justice a reality for all God's children".

In more explicit ways Black Liberation Theology has been interpreted by some as a theology of judgment which does not only involve the notion that to be "Christ-like...require[s] spirituality and a commitment to the welfare of those who suffer" and the purpose of "rethinking ...power dynamics that bred pain and suffering within African American communities" (Pinn 220 and 222). According to Paul L. Lehmann's critique "Black Theology and 'Christian' Theology", the problematized aspect of Black Liberation Theology is the unanswered notion of how to respond to the oppression which it seeks to counter. He states that "the test by which the possibility of a 'Christian' theology beyond black theology and white theology stands or falls is provided by the critical tension between revolution and violence, on the one

hand, and reconciliation on the other” (148). At stake in this statement is the question of just how closely these theologies of race deal with the conflicts of society in a decidedly “ Christian” manner. Indeed, this notion can be stripped of its theological bent to understand the extent to which black theology excludes the oppressor, judges the oppressor and overcomes the dominant system imposed by the oppressor. Borg takes a definitive stance: Jesus’ resistance did not entail the use of violence (Borg 249). There seems to be, thus, room for interpretation on the history of the black liberation movement and how strictly it followed the teachings of resistance made clear in Jesus’ apocalyptic speeches, actions and parables.

What remains certain, however, is that the apocalyptic nature of Jesus’ teachings can be used as a framework to measure the presence of apocalyptic undertones in the language of Black Liberation Theology. Pinn makes the striking observation that the basis of Black Liberation Theology “[entails] a commitment to Christ as a radical, black Messiah who, in keeping with the will of God, was concerned with the disruption of status quo institutions and mindsets” a statement which presents an uncanny similarity to the very purpose of the apocalyptic teachings of the historical Jesus, despite the fact that we must look at the terms “ Christ” and “ Messiah” in a nuanced way, eschewing the strictures of belief rather than historicity (224). It is not hyperbole to state that Black Liberation Theology, as it pertains in comparison with the apocalyptic teachings of Jesus, is itself an apocalyptic theology. Inherent in it is the venture to undo oppressive systems in the present, as was the propelling force behind the apocalyptic teachings of Jesus about the Kingdom of God. The striking difference here is that the

kingdom, in terms of the black liberation movement, was never fully characterized in the way that it was by the historical Jesus.

Cone believed that it had not yet been revealed if America was “ beyond redemption” for the injustices committed against black people; that it was up to “ white America” to respond positively to Black theology and the Black Power movement in order to avoid civil unrest (Cone 1997). Some predominantly black churches, such as Trinity United Church, Chicago were founded on the vision of Black Liberation Theology and remain primary examples within the black American community (Posner, 2008). However, the decades since the peak of Black Liberation Theology have witnessed a shift in focus from Biblical to that of societal; from Jesus and the Kingdom of God to that of the secular and notions of individual freedom of self-expression. With movements such as Black Lives Matter taking the place of Black Theology, one might wonder if, perhaps, the Kingdom of God characterized by Jesus is still not realized, in terms of Black Liberation Theology. Perhaps, the Kingdom of God evolves with the times.

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